Developing teacher professional identity through online learning: A social capital perspective

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Abstract

Social capital has been defined as the 'networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or amongst groups' (ABS, 2004, p. 5). Fundamental to social capital theory is the proposition that networks of relationships can facilitate access to resources of value to individuals or groups for specific purposes. A social capital perspective to designing learning environments in preservice teacher education would suggest that the quality of the learning experienced is impacted by the networks to which preservice teachers have access, the resources that are available within those networks, and the norms and levels of trust that shape the kinds of interactions that take place within those networks.

This paper describes and critiques an online learning environment that was designed from a social capital perspective to help preservice teachers learn a professional teacher identity. The online activity formed part of a subject in the second year of a four year undergraduate education degree at an Australian university. Developing or learning a professional identity is an ongoing process that is social in nature and negotiated in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Such communities of practice developed in the online environment of this case.

In the study, changes to the identity resources (Falk & Balatti, 2003) associated with a teacher professional identity were considered as evidence of learning. The data analysed comprised the online text preservice teachers produced and their responses to survey questions concerning the learning they experienced over the semester-long subject.

Two findings of note are the potential for online interaction of the kind described in this paper to develop professional literacies and to normalise the deprivatisation of practice. In an era in which teaching practice is being made more visible and accountable to the public, these two professional identity resources are important in developing the professional confidence necessary for sustainable teaching careers. A dilemma that remained unresolved in the study was the voluntary nature of the participation in the online activities.

Key words: professional teacher identity, social capital, preservice teacher education

Introduction

Professional teacher identity, that is, how we perceive ourselves as teachers and how we think others perceive us is related to the professional role we assume (Goodson & Cole, 1994) and to the self (Antonek, McCormick & Donato, 1997), the person who is in the role. Developing or learning a teacher professional identity begins before a graduate's first posting with their own experiences as a child in the classroom (Lortie, 1975) and continues well beyond it. It is an ongoing process that is social in nature and negotiated in what Wenger (1998) calls communities of practice. For preservice teachers, the schools in which they undertake professional experience are such communities of practice. In different ways, their university-based program may also provide a community of practice in which teacher identity develops.

This paper considers how the online community of practice trialled as the major part of a second year subject in an Australian undergraduate program helped preservice teachers develop

professional teacher identities. The cohort consisted of 135 early childhood, primary and secondary preservice teachers with most under the age of 25 (86%) and female (77%).

After having taught the subject six times, the subject coordinator concluded that the traditional lecture tutorial mode of delivery had failed to capitalise on assets that preservice teachers bring to the course and also had failed to address impediments that preservice teachers encounter in achieving the intended outcomes of the subject. Because the non-compulsory tutorial face-to-face interaction among the preservice teachers was limited to one hour/week, the rich diversity of knowledge, skills, life experiences and teaching experiences available within the group as a collective was not tapped into adequately. Also, the opportunities to learn to interact professionally with one another in a respectful but intellectually robust way had been limited. For some, reliance on the lecturer and tutors to "decode texts" led to devaluing their own and their peers' knowledge. Evident, too, in any given cohort was the wide range of written literacy skills ranging from excellent to very poor with the lower levels being at an unacceptable level. Preservice teachers rarely saw one another's writing because almost all written text was assessment for the examiners' eyes only. Interacting in an online environment had the potential to address these issues.

The paper begins with a brief outline of the two main conceptualisations that led to the design of this particular online community. Firstly, we describe how "learning identity", in this case, professional teacher identity, was conceptualised and then we explain how a social capital perspective to learning a professional teacher identity led to the design of the online community. The learning community is then described and the paper concludes with an assessment of how the online community of practice provided opportunities for its members to develop professional identities as teachers.

Learning a professional identity

Falk and Balatti's (2003) learning identity framework (see Figure 1 for an abbreviated version) used here developed from a synthesis of identity related literature in learning contexts and input from practising teachers. It was used in this case to help determine the nature of the online activities that preservice teachers undertook. The framework presents identity in terms of "identity sources", "identity resources", and the "processes" by which identity resources are learnt.

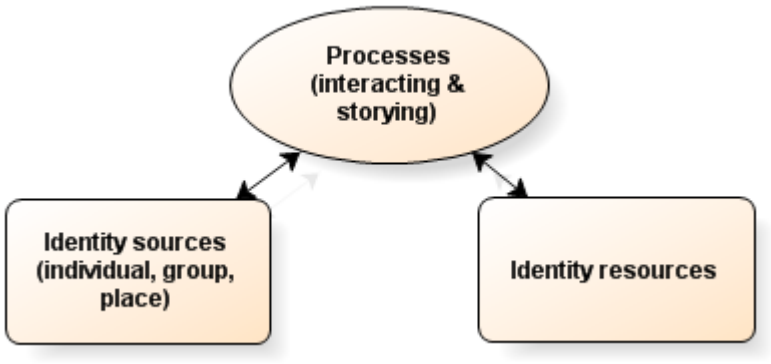

Figure 1: The learning identity framework

Identity sources, the first element, are those sets of social experiences in which people engage and which shape the way they see themselves. Class, gender, age and ethnicity quickly come to mind but to this list can be added family, work, religion, organisations, nationality and many more. Place, too, is a source of identity. In this case, the "identity source" was the "profession of teacher" as enacted in the online community of preservice teachers enrolled in the subject.

Identity resources, the second element, are the "common understandings related to personal, individual and collective identities" (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000, p. 100) that people produce. The framework identifies these resources as behaviours, knowledges, beliefs and feelings that come from having a sense of "belonging – in different ways and to different degrees of intensity in any given context at any given moment" (Falk & Balatti, 2003, p. 182) to the groups in which the identity sources are located. For this preservice teacher education program, one of the most important lists of behaviours, knowledges and beliefs that pertain to developing a teacher identity is the professional standards produced by the teacher registration body of the state (Queensland College of Teachers, 2006). Well over 100 items are listed but they are not the only identity resources that contribute to the professional teacher identity. Identity resources also include one's sense of self as a teacher which encompasses feelings such self confidence (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001), the comfort one feels in wearing the "hat" of teacher, or more generally, the sense of belonging (Wenger, 1998), albeit as a preservice teacher, to the group that identifies as future school teachers .

According to the framework, identity resources are learnt through the processes of interacting and storying, the third element. Identity formation, re-formation and co-construction occur through interacting and storying. Interacting occurs in the here and now; storying is retrospective.

Learning occurs through interacting and "interactions are the engine room of identity" (Falk & Balatti, 2003, p. 184). Through interacting with people or socially produced resources, such as books or the internet, the following cognitive processes are engaged: anticipating, choosing, creating, evaluating, experiencing, feeling, performing, redefining, remembering, talking about and thinking. The online learning tasks were designed so that the interactions incorporated these cognitive demands.

"Storying" is also integral to developing identity. From the field of neurological research, Damasio (1999, p. 224) explains that the image we build and rebuild of our self, our autobiographical self, comes from "the remodelling of the lived past" and "to the laying down and remodelling of the anticipated future." Writing narratives about past experience from different points of view and reflecting on narratives in terms of the learnings they offer for future practice as a teacher constituted a significant part of the online activities.

Another aspect of the process of learning identity that Figure 1 attempts to capture through the double ended arrows is the interconnection of the three elements. One's existing identity resources, for example, affect how one interacts and stories which, in turn, affects the kinds of new identity resources learnt from the identity sources at one's disposal. The reverse is also true. The nature of the identity sources available impacts the nature of the interacting and storying which, in turn, influences the kinds of identity resources drawn on or generated. The significance of this to the designer of learning experiences, in this case the preservice teacher educator, is twofold. It is a reminder that learners bring with them a unique set of identity resources which influence how they interact and story. It is also a reminder that the kinds of identity resources learnt depend on the identity sources available and how the interacting and storying are made possible. Useful in understanding both relationships is the notion of social capital.

Social capital in learning a professional identity

Social capital has been defined as the 'networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or amongst groups' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, p. 5). Fundamental to social capital theory (Coleman, 1988, Portes, 1998) is the proposition that networks of relationships can facilitate access to resources of value to individuals or groups for specific purposes.

A social capital perspective to designing learning environments (Balatti, Black & Falk, 2009, Balatti & Black, in press) in preservice teacher education would suggest that the quality of the learning experienced is impacted by the networks to which preservice teachers have access, the resources that are available within those networks, and the norms and levels of trust that shape the kinds of interactions that take place within those networks.

The online community began as a network whose membership comprised all preservice teachers undertaking the subject. The activity within the network was designed so that preservice teachers interacted with one another through engaging in the prescribed tasks in accordance with certain communication "rules". The choice of tasks and rules was driven by the features of Louis, Marks and Kruse's (1996) model of the professional learning community; these are "shared values, focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatised practice, and reflective dialogue" (p. 760). Deprivatisation of practice was arguably the most challenging aspect because it required participants to expose their thoughts and writing to the entire cohort. In an era in which teaching practice is being made more visible and accountable to the public, the professional identity resources related to deprivatising practice are important in developing the professional confidence necessary for sustainable teaching careers.

Norms to do with formality of communication and the courtesy and respect required when responding to colleagues' work or when referring to their own students were established. The aim was to ensure a safe environment in which to contribute. All the blog tasks were structured and required formal writing in order to improve literacy. The online tasks involved description, analysis and reflection of hypothetical or real life classroom experiences, one's own or those of others. Tasks ranged from reconstructing one's own school experiences to presenting lesson plans to writing and analysing narratives to do with classroom management. Some called for preservice teachers to talk to their school supervisors. Some tasks invited preservice teachers to comment about peers' work including offering critique. The work posted on the website was available to all for reading and for comment. Participation was voluntary.

Context and description of online interaction

The second year subject, in which the online community was located, is the first of three subjects in the professional development strand, a strand which develops knowledge of teachers' work including learning about learners, planning, creating a safe and supportive classroom environment, and teacher wellbeing (see Knight, Balatti, Haase, & Henderson, 2010 for a discussion of resilience education in the subject). The subject comprises two school based learning and on campus course work. The school based component consists of ten half day a week of professional experience in a school in which preservice teachers do extensive observations, teach lessons; and complete prescribed reflection tasks. The course work component of the subject comprises weekly online blogs and online learning guides which replace the traditional two hour lecture. Preservice teachers were supported by weekly email updates, informal meeting times, workshops on a needs basis plus weekly one hour tutorials for groups of 20-25 people. These groups became the online communities but postings from the entire cohort were easily accessible to all. To encourage independence, the lecturer and tutors did not participate in the online community. The assessment comprised school based assessment and written university based assessment. The latter was based on the weekly online activities and their professional experience. Completion of the online activities was not a compulsory requirement of the course and neither was tutorial attendance but participation was encouraged. Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) underpinned the subject with reflection playing a critical role in linking theory with practice. Hence, the purpose of the online network of preservice teachers was to share learnings from reflecting on the professional experience using the literature prescribed and colleagues' accounts of their experiences.

Method

A large body of data including participation rates, results, the blogs themselves and survey data midway and at the end of the subject was collected and analysed using Nvivo and Excel software packages. The findings reported here result from analysis of data to do with participation rates and responses to questions from the survey completed in the last week of the thirteen week term. Eighty-four of the 135 (62%) preservice teachers completed the survey which sought feedback on their learning experiences during the subject and in particular the online aspect. The survey was administered in the last tutorial and also emailed to absentee students. With the exception of six, all were completed in the tutorial. No claim is being made that the respondents are representative of the whole cohort.

Findings and discussion

The completion rate of the online activities over the semester across the cohort was approximately 60% with individual preservice teacher completion rates ranging from 0% to 100%. Participation in this non-assessable activity in the last few weeks of the semester decreased with the assessment pressure from university coursework cited as being the main reason. Here we include summaries of responses to questions from the last survey.

The end-of-semester survey included questions concerning student experience of the online learning environment (for detail see Henderson, Balatti, Knight, & Haase, 2010). The first question (Table 1) asked people to rate from 1-10 the learning value from the three main types of online interaction, namely, the writing and posting of their own blogs, the reading of other people' work and the responding to other people's work. A comparison of the perceived learning value of the different kinds of interactions in the 7-10 range showed a comparable proportion of people highly valuing the reading (62%) and writing (60%) interactions. A much smaller percentage valued the learning gained from responding to other people's work (34%). The markedly less perceived learning value may be related to the lower contribution rate of this kind of interaction which in turn may be related to time constraints or lack of confidence.

Table 1: Perceived learning value in online interactions

	Percentage of respondents		
Rating (10 highest)	**Writing & posting one's own blogs**	**Reading others' blogs**	**Responding to others**
Unable to say - inactive	4.76%	4.76%	11.90%
1 to 2	2.38%	3.57%	9.52%
3 to 4	3.57%	9.52%	10.71%
5 to 6	29.76%	20.24%	33.33%
7 to 8	40.48%	45.24%	29.76%
9 to 10	19.05%	16.67%	4.76%

The second question (Table 2) asked for a comparison of the comfort level experienced doing the online work at the end of the semester with how they felt at the beginning. Change in level of comfort was considered to be an indication of a developing sense of belonging to the community and of confidence. Half felt more comfortable by semester's end but almost 20% continued to feel uncomfortable.

Table 2: Change in comfort rating over the semester

Level of comfort	Total (%)
More comfortable	50%
Just as comfortable	31%
Just as uncomfortable	13%
More uncomfortable	6%
Total	100%

Preservice teachers were also invited to explain their responses. Most explanations were given by those who had experienced an increase in comfort. A range of different reasons are reproduced here (Table 2) to illustrate the diversity of responses. The first column identifies the developing "professional teacher identity resource" evident in the reason given in the second column.

Table 3: Evidence of developing professional teacher identities

Professional identity resource	Quote
Developing ITC know-how	"I had never actually done a blog before this subject but, once I completed some, I became more confident."
Developing sense of belonging in professional learning community (PLC)	"You start to feel more comfortable with your peers allowing more depth within the blogs."
Developing trust within the PLC	"At first I was unsure what was going to happen with my work. At the end, happy to share it with others online."
Developing professional literacies	"At first I really stressed out about my ability to write appropriately but now I feel confident with my writing abilities."
Developing professional knowledge	"At first, I was unsure about my writing and if it was correct. Also what people thought of my responses. Once I improved relating my response to theory, I became more confident."
Developing ease with deprivatisation of practice	"At first, it was scary knowing other people could read what you had written but then I just got used to it and became more confident."
Developing praxis	"As [time passed] I could base the blogs more on professional experience which also made the readings more clear."
Developing sense of collaboration	"At first I was hesitant about people reading my blogs but now I see that it helps others."

Although far fewer in number, there were also some negative comments explaining the lack of improvement in comfort. Four are reproduced below. Apart from the general comment concerning a lack of enjoyment the common thread amongst the other three appears to be feeling uncomfortable with the deprivatisation of their work:

"Do not enjoy learning or working online."

"Don't like other people reading my work."

"I do not want my fellow students to see my less-than-polished work and ideas."

"I was always scared people would read my blog and think it was bad and judge me."

As Table 3 indicates, the online activity in which the preservice teachers engaged did provide opportunities for participants to learn a range of identity resources pertaining to the profession of teacher. It could even be argued that it provided opportunities to develop particular identity resources (e.g., deprivatisation of practice) that other aspects of the subject did not or could not

provide. However, what is also evident is that participation was not uniform and the learning outcomes from being members of the online community were not experienced by all. For example, see Haase, Balatti, Knight, & Henderson (2010) for a discussion of the difference between male and female levels of engagement and outcomes. Social capital is engaged through interactions and if the interactions, either active or passive (such as reading but not contributing), are absent then the intended identity resources cannot be learnt.

Furthermore, no claim can be made concerning the extent to which the preservice teachers will further develop or even retain the "identity resources" they learnt as members of the online community. If their undergraduate preservice teaching program is viewed as a "learning-to-teach ecosystem" (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998, p. 169) then the other elements of the program and their interconnectedness will affect retention and further development of any identity resources developed through this experience. Following up these preservice teachers could prove to be useful further research.

Conclusion

Dilemmas that remained unresolved by the end of the trial centred around the voluntary nature of the participation in the online activities. A major challenge is increasing the participation rate without compromising the values that the online community aims to foster, such as the voluntary sharing of experiences in a safe environment. Making the work compulsory or assessable would change the "identity source" in ways that may diminish, if not destroy, the possibility of developing particular identity resources considered important to being a teacher. The issue of free riders, that is, members who access other people's work and resources but do not contribute any of their own has also not been addressed. Better understanding of these dilemmas is required.

The information technology of the 21st century has created new spaces in which communities of practice and especially professional learning communities can find expression. Online communities of the kind reported here do not replace the school based communities of practice; rather, they provide another space for preservice teachers to do teachers' work and thus learn professional teacher identity resources. Many of the participants in this trial developed professional teacher identity resources such as embracing the deprivatisation of practice and engaging in reflective dialogue.

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